

KALI PRIMARIES

VIOLENCE against WOMEN

**New Movements
and
New Theories
in
India**

Gail Omvedt

Violence Against Women

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Women face specific forms of violence: rape and other forms of sexual abuse, female foeticide, witch-killing, sati, dowry murders, wife-beating. Such violence and the continued sense of insecurity that is instilled in women as a result keeps them bound to the home, economically exploited and socially suppressed. In the ongoing struggles against violence in the family, society and the State, we recognize that the State is one of the main sources of violence and stands behind the violence committed by men against women in the family, the work-place and the neighbourhood. For these reasons a mass women's movement should focus on the struggle against them in the home or out of it.

—*Resolution,*

Nari Mukti Sangharsh Sammelan,
Patna, 8 February 1988

From the time of the first surplus in agriculture an era of looting began . . . Rajas and Maharajas took the place of looting bandits. Zamindars and sawkars took their place. After some time these also were replaced by merchants and industrialists. The method of looting went on changing ; the looting system endured. The loot that goes on today is with a minimum of weapons, but the reign of goondas in the villages and dadas in the cities continues. The insecurity outside the household is today the greatest obstacle in the path of women. Conscious that, compared to the atrocities outside the house, atrocities within the house are endurable, women not only continued to accept their inferiority in the house and society, but even called it sweet.

—*Peasant Women's Alliance: Thought and Direction,*
Draft for Shetkari Mahila Aghadi
Second Session, Amraoti, 8-10 November 1989

The scientific revolution in Europe transformed nature from terra mater into a machine and a source of raw material; with

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this transformation it removed all ethical and cognitive constraints against its violation and exploitation . . . The new relationship of man's domination and mastery over nature was thus also associated with new patterns of domination and mastery over women, and their exclusion from participation as partners in both science and development . . . Women, as victims of the violence of patriarchal forms of development, have risen against it to protect nature and preserve their survival and sustenance . . . They have challenged the western concept of nature as an object of exploitation and have protected her as Prakriti, the living force that supports life.

—*Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, pp.xvi-xvii
Vandana Shiva

Introduction

The issue of violence against women has been the most pervasive theme of the new women's liberation movement in India since its rise in 1974-75. First it was the horrifying, rising toll of fire in the growing numbers of "dowry deaths"; then from 1980 with the cases of Mathura, Maya Tyagi and Rameeza Bi the problem of rape burst out of the shadows to stand as the symbol of women's oppression. Finally, the last few years have seen dramatic revivals of the ancient custom of sati as well as female infanticide—and at the same time the advent of "ultramodern" medical forms of violence against females through bio-medical practice, such as amniocentesis.

Thus the opposition to individual cases of bride-burning, rape, violence and atrocity has been a major focus for women's organizing. But to a large extent this has occurred in the absence of a theoretical understanding of the social structuring and causes of violence or why it should be taken as a focus of struggle. Too often Indian feminist activists have remained caught up in inherited theories of traditional Marxism which have seen violence only as a derivative of economic exploitation and property ownership—or they have repeated the tendencies of western radical feminism which sees violence as an inherent feature of the "dialectics of sex"

posing women against men. Yet in the last few years some important theoretical initiatives have been made. Strikingly, these have come from intellectuals and activist-leaders associated with movements of rural women against their exploitation both as women and as peasants, as forest-dwellers or as members of low castes. Among the most prominent and challenging of these are Sharad Patil, leader of a small adivasi-based communist party that espouses a combination of Marxism with Phule-Ambedkarism, i.e., the thought of the main anti-caste revolutionaries of Maharashtra; Sharad Joshi, leader of one of the most powerful farmers' organizations in India and inspirer of its women's front; and Vandana Shiva, a feminist and environmental activist associated with the Chipko movement of Himalayan peasants.

In focusing this essay on three major writers on women (and two of them men!) we do not mean to imply that no other good theoretical and empirical work on women is being produced. In fact there is much else being written and many, many experiments in action. But, the works of Patil, Joshi and Shiva are not only creative (for all their frequent oversimplifications, occasional polemics and even crudities), they stand not as the work of isolated intellectuals but of people engaged in struggle and in so doing reflect the dynamics of the participation of women in the "new social movements" prominent in India today—the ecology movement, the peasant movement, the anti-caste movement. The creativity they represent thus comes from the margins and depths of Indian society, and it is a creativity capable of transforming not only that society but contributing to a world transformation also. For this reason, we shall begin with a discussion of the problems of violence, look at "traditional Marxism" and "radical feminist" theories and efforts to transcend these in both the West and in India, and then examine the theories and implications for action of Sharad Patil, Sharad Joshi and Vandana Shiva. The intention is not so much to "give answers" as to push forward the debate in an era when violence seems to be rampant and increasing, and traditional movements for socialism and liberation are caught in a crisis.

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Posing the problem of violence

In February, 1988 a major women's conference was organized in Patna, Bihar, by a wide coalition of women's groups ranging from those who call themselves "autonomous feminist" to women's organisations connected with radical mass movements. Seven hundred women gathering for three days of group discussions, and 10,000 organised in a militant mass rally on the fourth day, covered a good number of topics, but the issue of "women and violence" was one of the most important. Two things are noteworthy about the Resolution of the Nari Mukti Sangharsh Sammelan which attempted to transcend the "traditional feminist" linkages of the majority of its organisers: in dealing with the growing violence against women it pinpointed the State as the major support for and source of violence; and it asserted the autonomy of violence as a factor behind economic exploitation.

Nevertheless, the resolution and the discussions behind it raised more questions than it answered, and we can therefore begin with examining some of these issues regarding the social structuring of violence against women.

The Patna Conference Resolution, in linking violence against women with the State, raises, at one level, the question of analysing contemporary society: how is the growing violence against women in Indian society (and how much is it growing?) linked with contemporary crises in State domination and economic exploitation? Here we face the challenge of giving a new, holistic but still materialistic explanation that can link together economic crises, ecological destruction, goondaizing trends in the State itself and the terrifying spasms of religious fundamentalism and communal violence, and define the ways these are associated with the victimisation of women.

To lay the groundwork for understanding this, however, we need to dissect some aspects of the patriarchal suppression of women and examine the relationship between violence and economic exploitation, violence and sexuality, violence and caste/class/rural-urban divisions, nationality, and violence and culture.

The first question is the major one of the relationship between violence and the economic exploitation of women. The Patna

Resolution argues that violence plays a major role in keeping women suppressed and economically exploited. In fact, we should ask if this is not a two-way relationship. On the one hand, the pervasive violence against women throughout society has an obvious economic function: in keeping women under control, in preventing them from going out of the home to take advantage of economic opportunities, it forces them into the most low-paid or unpaid forms of labour. Brutal suppression in fact keeps women in their propertyless and resourceless state. We can identify specific forms of violence—e.g. witch-killings in adivasi communities—which are used by men of a community as a whole to keep women from obtaining access to land. We can also look at the situation of divorced/deserted or single women in general, and see how insecurity (the fear of violence) prevents millions of women from claiming their legal rights to property inheritance. On the other hand, the basic economic dependence of women, their propertylessness and resourcelessness, renders them fearfully weak in standing up and challenging the violence and power that is used against them in society. In the workforce, women are overwhelmingly relegated to the unorganized sector (as agricultural labourers, unorganized sector wage workers, peasants, gatherers and sellers of forest produce, and unpaid subsistence producers) and are economically weak; the Hindu patrilineal and patrilocal family system cuts them off from access to property except through men; and their resources in terms of education, skills, socialised self-confidence, etc. are much lower than those of men. Thus, it appears that violence keeps women economically dependent and super-exploited, while economic dependence and exploitation render them unable to combat violence. The relation is apparently circular: the question is, which is prior? How is one to break through the circle?

It does not take great insight to see that there is also a close link between violence and sexuality. On the one hand, if we examine all the varieties of violence practised against women, the large majority of cases seem linked to questions of sexuality. The sati case of Roop Kunwar is almost paradigmatic here: she was forced to live away from her husband, a psychological case, because of his impotence; when he found that she was having an affair with

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another man he committed suicide, and the burden of guilt along with the traditional religious conceptualization of women's faithfulness as central to her husband's welfare was used, along with physical force, to psychologically terrorize her into her death. Aside from the unpublicized aspect of this most notorious recent case of violence against an Indian woman, the everyday reality is that doubts about women's "faithfulness" and efforts to control women's sexuality are major factors in all forms of violence. But if on the one hand violence is sexual, on the other hand sexuality in contemporary society seems to be pervaded with violence, defined and practised in terms of dominance and submission. Here, rather than the question of which comes first, the main theoretical question we confront is: does violence necessarily have a sexual character, and is sexuality inherently (biologically) linked to force and dominance—or can we locate social and historical factors that determine the nature of such a linkage today?

Third, we need to look at the different forms of violence confronted by different sections of women, the relationship between violence and caste/class/rural-urban divisions, nationality and other forms of division among women. Here some general patterns can be noted: upper-caste women (and those middle castes which try to follow upper-caste patterns or to "sanskritize" themselves) are involved in purdah norms that keep them confined to the home and so sheltered from external violence. In addition, efforts by many working-class and lower-caste men to follow the bourgeois family ideal (the "capitalist nuclear family" of a wage-earning husband and non-waged house-keeping wife) have the same effect of pushing women into the home. The rationale used in both cases is that of "protecting" women against external violence. At the same time, employed women in the urban organized sector (primarily upper-caste) who do go out of the home generally have enough resources (for instance in terms of available transport) to provide them protection from the worst forms of social goondaism. Thus upper-caste, upper-middle class urban organized sector women tend to be subjected to violence in the family rather than to external "social violence". For, very often for these women, the very family that protects them is also the source of the greatest violence against them: it is in these sections that

dowry deaths are the most rampant; that female feticide is most practised; and forms of suppression such as wife-beating also occur but are more often masked from social visibility than among lower-class and rural women.

In contrast, lower-caste, lower-class women often claim a greater degree of relative independence with regard to their own men; they are often more assertive than the sheltered upper-caste and upper-class women, and they may fight back, sometimes even physically, against the more brutal forms of wife-beating and other violence in the family. At the same time they are more subject to social violence (or "social patriarchy")—molestation, rape, murder by local goondas, landlords, contractors, political bosses, and so on. Sexually, they may have quite a different practice from the established social norms of submission and *pativrata*, but this very fact defines them as "bad" women who are considered fair game for sexual assault. Here again we have a kind of dialectical circle: within the framework of the dominant norms, purity and prostitution are two sides of the same coin, and the social definition of a woman's status is in terms of the duality of "good" (submissive wife) and "bad" (independent, prostitute). The very independence of lower-class, lower-caste unorganized sector women defines them as sexually accessible and hence vulnerable to violence—while the upper-caste, upper-class women are often ready to accept the purdah traditions that keep them in the home, the dominance that lies behind the protectiveness of the household men, and even the family violence that lurks beneath it all, precisely because of this very vulnerability to violence outside the home. The question we confront is: what determines both the patterning of violence and the links between its various forms?

These questions of the interrelationship between violence, exploitation and sexuality—and their patterning among different social sections of women—go to the heart of the question of violence against women. But we also have to ask about violence against women in the Indian context: even while there is a focus on the question of violence within the women's movement and a corresponding tendency to depict women as helpless victims, we have at the same time cultural traditions that look on women as sources of power and define creativity as female: *stri shakti*,

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prakriti—not to mention the tradition of heroic and fighting women, or the *virangana* tradition. What is the meaning of these cultural traditions and can they provide resources for women's struggle? And—along with the questioning of the caste-based patterning of violence against women—is there anything specific in the traditional caste/social structure of India that has embedded in it specific forms of violence against women?

These, then, are the questions raised by the social patterning of violence against women. They can be summed up as follows:

1. What is the role of the State—along with the capitalist crisis, the growth of religious fundamentalism and inter-communal conflicts—in the present incidence of violence against women?
2. What is the relationship between violence and economic dependence and exploitation: is one primary, and if so, which? Are they mutually interactive and if so, how do we examine this interaction?
3. What is the relationship between violence and sexuality: does it have a historical and social cause, or natural and biological cause—or some combination of the two?
4. What is the effect and incidence of violence on different classes, castes, communities of women: are there radically different and separate forms of violence experienced by these women, or are the different forms of violence that we discover closely enough linked together so that all women have an interest in some common fight against them—and if so, how can this fight be organized?
5. What is the relationship between specific Indian traditions of *stri shakti* or *prakriti* to violence against women; in particular how is this violence related to caste structures and traditions?

Theories of violence against women: Marxist, feminist and beyond

Violence (or force or domination), production and exploitation, and sexuality, in fact, constitute three basic social material forces that are motive causes for social-historical change and a basis for social structure, while issues of identity and cultural tradition deal

with the articulation in consciousness of the social material base of society. They also constitute themes around which theories of women's oppression and violence against women have revolved—with some theories stressing one factor, some another. In particular, from the rise of the new "women's liberation movement" in advanced capitalist societies in the late 1960s, a "traditional Marxist" trend of analysis has focused on production, exploitation and property, while a "radical feminist" tradition of thinking has arisen which has stressed sexuality, the "dialectics of sex" and, secondarily, violence. These have, along with liberalism (in its form of "liberal feminist" theories) constituted the main streams of analysis of women's oppression in advanced capitalist societies. And although thinkers and activists in third world societies have done important work from the mid-19th century onwards, because of western hegemony those streams constitute the most articulated theories which have influenced women's movements the world over.

Therefore it is useful to begin with the main "traditional Marxist" and "radical feminist" analyses of theories of violence against women, and look at the ways these have influenced thinking in India. Since "liberal feminist" interpretations that downplay conflict and exploitation have been of little relevance to third world societies, they need not be discussed here in great detail. However, a brief description should be given of recent western attempts (theories by socialist-feminists, women of colour and eco-feminists) to transcend the dichotomies of emphases on purely property/economic rights or sexuality.

1. *Traditional Marxism*: While Marxism the world over has been the most important ideological influence for the liberation struggles of any exploited section, it has usually operated in the more mechanical and stereotyped form practised under Stalin, rather than in the more comprehensive and dialectical thinking present in Marx's own writings. Nevertheless, many of the charges of a patriarchal lack of attention to the specificities of women's exploitation can also be laid at the door of Marx himself.

The core of Marx's social analysis is his emphasis on the role of human production—the conscious action of humans upon nature which creates not only products but "society" and human nature

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itself. Exploitative relations of production, centering on the extraction and appropriation of surplus labour, are seen as determining all other forms of social oppression and exploitation. This implies that only the rise of a surplus (or potential surplus) made possible by settled agricultural production leads to various forms of exploitation, including male domination over women.

The analysis of women's oppression is inserted into this broad framework. *The Germany Ideology* was an early attempt by Marx and Engels to put down some enduring themes, stressing the importance, along with the production of commodities, of the production of human life; here, describing the latter as a "natural-social" relation, they made the biologicistic assumption that it is women who tend naturally to be "producers of life", and that the first form of property "lies in the family, where wife and child are slaves of the husband". However, it was Engels who made the most thorough efforts to develop a historical materialist theory and it is his *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* which has become the world-wide radical textbook on the "woman question". Engels began by using the early framework of production of commodities versus production of life to hypothesise a basic division between pre-class tribal societies based on kinship (or "ties of sex") and class society based on the exploitation of labour and the territorial state. He developed his theory, though, as a "stage" theory of social evolution utilizing what was in his time (though many of its points have since been disproved) the most advanced anthropological theory available.

Engels asserted that there was in pre-agricultural societies a basic equality between men and women: though there was a gender division of labour in which men were mainly "producers" (as hunters, agriculturalists and herders) and women were "reproducers" (in the home), since productivity was low and reproduction was more crucial, women had a higher social status. In addition, since the paternity of a child was usually unknown, "mother-right" (matriliney) prevailed and women had a dominant role in the family as well. However, as agriculture and herding developed and a surplus emerged and increased, males gained control over the surplus and over the means of production, and from this were able to establish their control over women in the

family. At the same time, contending classes arose (those who owned the means of production versus those who were increasingly deprived of such ownership) and the State developed to contain their conflict. Thus classes, the patriarchal family and the state are seen as developing a single process in which both class and patriarchy are seen as preceding the State; violence is seen as a result of (and secondary to) economic exploitation; and economic exploitation is seen as resulting from the rise of class divisions, with class defined in terms of control of private property.

In his magnum opus, *Capital*, Marx gave a brief description of the productive character of women's domestic work, but did not analyse the relation of this to capitalist exploitation or the implications of the fact that women's labour was not free (even when they were factory workers) but controlled by their husbands—that (in Marx's terms) working class men were forced to become "slave-drivers" selling even the labour of their wives and children on the market.

It is from Engels that Indian and most third world Marxism has drawn its catechism on women's oppression, to the point that booklets often use even the 19th century anthropological language of Engels in describing the stages of society. Generally, underlying the overall approach to violence has been not only a basic economism, in the heavy stress on private property, but also a rationalism which saw human motives for violence as arising only from the need to protect property privilege or as a defence against an unpredictable nature. Typical is the description of the "origins of violence" in a paper submitted to the 1987 Patna Nari Mukti Sangharsh Sammelan:

Human society was forced to adopt counter-violence in self-defence while fighting violent aspects of nature in primitive society. Gradually, society developed to the stage of transforming nature with different tools. But this development introduced the element of private property, which culminated in exploitation and discrimination; force and violence became inevitable. (Paper submitted by Pragatishil Mahila Samity, West Bengal.)

Traditional Marxism strongly emphasizes that the fight for women's liberation is not a fight of women against men, but of

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women against the entire exploitative system. However, this system is seen in quite narrow terms, and there is a strong tendency to argue that once private property is abolished (through the establishment of collective ownership of the means of production), the exploitation and oppression of women will automatically or almost automatically, come to an end. As opposed to struggles against violence in the family, collective struggles against public forms of patriarchy and violence are stressed. But, though it is generally held that the ultimate fight is for the seizure of state power, the tendency is to focus these struggles on economic issues: wages, the organizing of the unorganized, the "participation of women in social production", and (but much more rarely) land and property rights. This outlook still constitutes the framework of left party analysis of the "woman question" in India.

2. *Radical feminism*: Radical feminism, which was willing to assert that men were the enemy, burst on the scene during the late 1960s and developed some of its theorizing in bold reaction to traditional Marxism. Radical feminist theories of patriarchy and violence can be traced back to such writings as Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectics of Sex*, Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, and a whole series of pamphlets and polemics (ranging from writings on the "myth of the vaginal orgasm" to the "politics of housework") which emerged from the burgeoning women's liberation movement as it confronted the changing forms of patriarchy in contemporary capitalist industrial society. Their approach has stressed the conflict between men and women—the dialectics of sex—as the primary contradiction in human society, and is seen as based on male power over weapons, gained first through hunting. Patriarchy is thus seen as the first form of social exploitation, and violence plays a central role in it.

Much of radical feminism has been based on giving a new twist to the common-sense identification of woman: nature/man: culture i.e. reversing it and emphasizing the processes of exploitation and the project of transcending exploitation to create a feminist and egalitarian society. Almost all strands of thought have stressed the importance of sexuality and sexual domination as a factor in history, and the potential power of women for their own liberation and as a force in any liberation movement. Almost all

have underlined the fact of violence, and violence has been a central theme in practical organizing—against rape, against wife-beating, “take back the night” campaigns against insecurity on the streets, etc. But there have been many different strands of thinking; early radical feminism denied the “natural” biological basis of male-female differences (this was the point of differentiating gender from “sex”), emphasized the transcending of such differences to reach an androgynous ideal, and saw modern technology (in which women could be freed from the burden of child-bearing) as a positive factor in achieving this. This trend still has a powerful voice: it is politically oriented and anti-capitalist (even if many women are caught in the problems of personal life) anti-separatist and anti-vanguardist, oriented to seeking alliances with varying movements for change, and with developing insights into the way in which modern technological developments (communications and bio-technologies) are breaking down old home/work, public/private and even human/machine distinctions.

However, a trend of what might be called “cultural feminism” has tended to veer in the opposite direction, accepting the differences between men and women as irrevocable, with men as “naturally” more prone to violence, women as “naturally” non-violent, nurturing and peaceful, but seeing women as superior. One form of this is “radical political lesbianism” (“feminism is the theory, lesbianism is the practice”) which rejects any life-relations with men and stresses the building of separate women’s communities and organizations (it is important to note the difference between this kind of lesbianism, and lesbianism which is taken as only a form of sexual preference and may be associated with various kinds of feminist ideology or no feminism at all). There is also a tendency towards a mother goddess-oriented spirituality, mythology and magic which personalizes (“feminizes”) nature, and a view of *all* science and technology as inherently dominating, militaristic and patriarchal.

Aspects of radical feminist thinking pervade most of the urban “autonomous feminist” groups. This is apparent in tendencies to see the struggle between men and women as inescapable and antagonistic, (“all men are potential rapists”) and to see violence in the family as the primary focus of organizing—rape, wife-beat-

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ing, amniocentesis, etc. Wage struggles or other economic issues are seen as not really "women's struggles", which are normally carried out in connection with mass organizations, and as "not really feminist" because of male domination. Though such feminists rarely manage to create "feminist spaces" in the form of actual communities of living as in western societies, this is substituted by an organizing orientation to work in small, presumably egalitarian and democratic (in contrast to "hierarchized" mass organisation) collectives.

In fact, some of the strengths of western radical feminism have been lacking in the context of India. In particular there has been an avoidance of public discussion of sexuality, partly due to fear of the backlash of Indian traditionalism (though in the society as a whole, outside of feminist circles, the issue of sexuality and sexual rights for women has been coming forward more and more). It is also striking that until recently well-known Indian feminist groups have also overlooked, on the whole, the concept of the *power* of women and have been part of the overall presentation of women as helpless *victims* of male violence and atrocity.

3. *Transcending the dichotomy: western attempts:* For a long time, the main western (and Indian) discussion of women's oppression revolved around the dichotomy of and conflict between a Marxist emphasis on production and private property, and a radical feminist stress on sexuality and its underlying violence. Even the initial effort to transcend this duality "socialist feminism", simply reproduced it. That is, in trying to combine theoretically "class" and "gender", or "capitalism" and "patriarchy", they accepted some unconscious, underlying assumptions which connected class/capitalism with the economic "base" and gender/patriarchy with a cultural-ideological "superstructure". This led to eclecticism, rather than theoretical integration. There has been a similar eclecticism in much of the tendency of "women of colour" feminists to combine class, gender and race (in being "anti-imperialist"), although in recent years the most powerful literature of western feminism has been produced by women from such oppressed minorities.

A "Marxist-feminist" theoretical trend, mainly based in academic rather than movement circles, has sought to theorize

women's oppression in terms of domestic labour and reproductive work. However, in spite of the value of bringing forth the crucial importance of this sphere of (almost) uniquely women's labour the "mode of reproduction" comes to be viewed as ultimately secondary to and determined by the "mode of production". An effort by the French feminist, Christine Delphy, to develop a materialist analysis from a radical feminist perspective by examining the "domestic mode of production" again leads nowhere because it is not integrated into a new total theory.

More creatively, a group of German feminists—who might now be called "eco-feminists"—have built on some of this work to develop an integrative theory revolving around women's role in reproductive labour and male violence. Maria Mies and others have seen "subsistence production", mainly performed by women, as the foundation for all forms of exploitation. Males, unable to relate creatively and productively to nature in the same way as women, were able to "produce" only with the help of tools and hence took more naturally to weapons, thus getting caught in violent and predatory forms of appropriation of labour-power and its products. This relationship between subsistence production and predatory, violent accumulation has continued throughout history in various forms; even the wage labour previously considered by Marxists to be central to capitalism has as its basis the subsistence production done by women (and also by third world peasants). Mies' analysis of "patriarchy and accumulation on a world scale" thus links the rise of capitalism, colonial exploitation of third world peasants, and the violence committed against women in the process of "housewifization". By and large this approach is a significant effort at bringing together all the themes of production, violence and sexuality. The German peace-feminist slogan, "There is no essential difference between the rape of a woman, the conquest of a country, or the destruction of the earth" sums up the overall liberatory thrust of this position. However it also has tendencies towards a totally negative view of science and technology and a "naturalistic" explanation of violence in which women are seen as having an inherently creative and productive relation to nature, men a predatory one.

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The new feminism in India: some directions forward

The new women's liberation movement in western countries has brought forward a rich and vibrant tradition of theorizing, including challenging at almost every point, many previously taken-for-granted assumptions of traditional Marxist or liberal theory. The issue of violence has been a focus not only of much organizing but also, more and more, of movement theorizing, though there is still a very deep tendency to link violence against women with "natural" biological male characteristics (or occasionally, as in the case of "women of colour", with western cultural characteristics).

Within India also a powerful, if often scattered and inarticulate, women's movement has pushed Marxists and establishment liberals alike to confront the question of patriarchy and gender. Many of the new feminists have also drawn upon the growing body of western theory ranging from questions about science and technology raised by "eco-feminists" to esoteric academic trends in "discourse theory." However, the most interesting innovations in theorizing in India appear rather to be linked to mass movements of various sections of rural poor women, and to draw upon indigenous traditions. In fact, the whole new women's liberation movement has a special dynamic in India, with growing numbers of toiling women asserting their rights not in isolation, not in connection simply with conscious feminist groups or the women's wings of the left political parties, but even more within the framework of the new social movements that have been so prominent in India in recent years. They are doing so in a context of growing social violence, economic polarization, political degeneration and ecological destruction with the tide of religious fundamentalism threatening a reasserted patriarchy. This context is reflected in their theorizing.

Sharad Patil and the anti-caste tradition: If we look historically at the social movements of India, the most powerful pro-women themes and actions have come not so much from the ranks of the nationalist movement or upper-caste moderate social reformers as from those of the radical anti-caste leaders who often found themselves in confrontation with nationalism in the non-brahmin and dalit movements—men like Jotiba Phule, B.R. Ambedkar, E.V.

Ramaswami "Periyar". Phule's life was perhaps paradigmatic in this respect. He not only founded one of the first schools for girls in India (in 1848 in Pune), but when he and his wife, Savitribai, had no children he resisted intense social pressure in refusing to take a second wife, and instead adopted a baby born to a Brahmin widow (the existence of such babies being a much-discussed sign of the "atrocities" of that period). This was an act that not only provoked a storm among Brahmins but also led to his being boycotted by his own middle-caste Mali community. Phule's earliest writings on women linked their oppression with that of sudras and ati-sudras (sudras and untouchables) in exploitation by the Brahmin-dominated caste system; in this the violence of conquest and the subordination of the indigenous inhabitants of India by the "Aryan" forerunners of the Brahmins was made central and was linked to the deception imposed by their religious books. Phule throughout attacked the "holy writings" of Hinduism with ferocity and attempted to build an alternative, peasant-based cultural unity of non-Brahmins and dalits, using themes such as the "Bali Raja" tradition. Then, after 1883, under the influence of the powerful but buried protest writings of a Maratha woman named Tarabai Shinde, Phule launched a fierce condemnation of male domination in the family. This included both Brahmin and non-Brahmin families and focused on the double standard which kept women helpless victims of *pativrata* while their husbands could marry or engage in as many sexual relationships as they wished. Finally, as an alternative to the deceptions of Hinduism and the caste and gender inequalities in the society around him, in the last years of his life Phule formulated a "public religion of truth", a broad humanistic monotheism stressing the "equality of each and every woman and man."

In recent years it has been primarily Sharad Patil, a former district leader of the CPI(M) who broke away to form his own Satyashodhak Communist Party based on a theory of "Marxism-Phule-Ambedkarism", who has tried to carry forward the tradition of analyzing women's oppression within an anti-caste framework. Patil's writings use the term "Phule-Ambedkarism" primarily as a signal of the need to combine the use of the category of "caste" with that of "class" in analyzing Indian society—in this

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respect it is like the eclecticism of most socialist-feminist theory in which the nature of "class" and economic relations is taken for granted as having been solved by Marxism. Patil has quite conventional Marxist analyses of class processes and fairly conventional attitudes towards the question of the organizational linkage of women's groups to the party; in addition, like many Marxists, he uses outdated anthropological sources and literary evidence quite uncritically. Nevertheless, an important achievement of his writings is that they make a discussion of man-woman relations, kinship and family forms, sexual domination, matriarchy, etc. central to an analysis of the history of caste/class exploitation in India—in contrast to most other Marxist intellectuals, party theorists or left academics who continue to discuss class issues and economic analyses without feeling the need to mention the place in them of women or the role of gender and patriarchy.

Patil's analysis of Indian history is divided into the stages of: matriarchal/ primitive communism; varna/slave society; jati/feudal society; and the jati-class (caste-class) society introduced from the time of British rule. These "stages" (Patil later introduces sub-stages) are in fact drawn from the Stalinist five-stage theory of history (i.e. primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism and socialism), modified with an insertion of Bachofen-Briffault theories of "matriarchy" and with the assertion that varna and jati represent the material base (and not simply the superstructure) of the slave and feudal stages. Thus, the first stage for Patil is not one of "primitive communist" equality, but of male-female contradictions and exploitation in which a communal tribal agricultural society is ruled over by a queen clan-mother; it is characterized not only by women's sexual promiscuity, but also (as with the classic "matriarchy" theories) the periodic sacrifice of her male consort. The following stage of slavery is characterized by the existence of varnas—ruling clans of Brahmins or Kshatriyas exploiting communal Sudra clans of slaves who are the producers. The first phase of this (the later period of Indus civilization) sees Asura priest-kings ruling a matrilineal society, then later conflicts between the patrilineal and matrilineal oligarchies. This whole period, Patil argues, stretches from the Indus civilization to the time of Buddha. Finally, this very tumultuous and transitional varna-slave period

comes to an end with the "feudal revolution" in which the Brahmin-dominated *jati* societies of the new Magadha-Mauryan states defeat the last *varna* oligarchies, the *sangh-ganas*. He sees this patriarchal Brahminism as a historical advance because production based on production by free (non-slave) but caste-bound Sudras replaces that by slaves (or *dasas*), but argues that it was in fact Buddhism which represented the ideological side of this advance.

In the process of this rather complex and fascinating (but often obscurely written) historical analysis, Patil brings to our attention the vast elements of the Indian tradition that have to do with male-female relations. These range from Pandu's arguments to Kunti as to why she should agree to have sons by another man, to the apparently quite "radical feminist" world-view of the asuras as described in the Bhagavad Gita:

They (Asuras) assert that the world originates without (the authorship of) a god, (for) it needs no such substratum, (as everything in) it evolves from non-being (into being); it originates from the union of the female and the male, and hence, how can it be sustained by any other object except sexual desire? (quoted in *Dasa-Sudra Slavery*, p.202).

The asuras here are taken to represent the original matrilineal non-Aryan rulers of the Harappan civilization.

The problem in this is that Patil's own interpretation of these far-ranging conflicts falls along the lines of a crude "traditional Marxism" which generally simply identifies non-Brahmin/non-Aryan/matrilineal (or matrilineal) societies with agriculture and Brahmin/Aryan/patrilineal (patriarchal) societies with pastoralism. Thus, for example, in a rather one-to-one fashion he argues that

... the strange sexual freedom enjoyed by women by universal consent in ancient agricultural societies ... was not senseless indulgence in passion but was considered to have magical significance. Primitive agricultural people all over the world firmly believed that permanent sexual freedom to their women was essential for ensuring the fertility of the soil.

(*ibid.*, p.78).

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Why "strange"? Here Patil's traditional attitudes become clear. From a feminist point of view, what should be emphasized is Patil's strikingly negative conception of women's power and of sexuality, unbound by patriarchy. If patriarchy is associated with violence against women, Sharad Patil can only see its opposite, matriarchy, as equally violent—sexual freedom for women is identified with domination and rule over males, even their periodic, bloody sacrifice. This undoubtedly represents the great psychocultural fear underlying conceptions of *stri-shakti* in the Indian tradition: that it is ultimately violent, deadly and destructive and hence needs to be culturally bound and subordinated. Could this be the reason that Patil opposed the proposal that 100 per cent women's panels be organized to contest the zila parishad elections in Maharashtra, with the argument that they represented "a dream of restoring matriarchy"—since any assertion of women's power is seen (unconsciously perhaps) as a threat.

Violence has an important place in Patil's writings, but in many ways his approach to it is like that of traditional Marxists, with the exception that "caste" replaces "class". The whole thrust of Patil's theory and organization has been to bring caste-based issues into the revolutionary movement; women's issues were only incorporated into this as an afterthought (partly under the pressure of the general women's movement, partly through the intervention of the adivasi women in his own organization). The "end of women's slavery", along with the "end of the slavery of Sudras and *dasas*" is now held to be a major goal, but the analysis of both their "slavery" and the programmes for struggle give them a secondary position. In the beginning of his major work, *Dasa-Sudra Slavery*, Patil writes:

Dasas and Sudras were the first ever creators of wealth, in the sense of surplus product, in ancient India. The great Indian civilization, which their ceaseless, back-breaking toil spread over nearly three millennia raised and nourished, has, in return, fashioned and perpetuated the shackles of their slavery and servitude. State power has terrorized them into smouldering submission, religion has preached to them the preordained birthright of ser-

vitute, and philosophy has revealed to them the evanescence and unreality of 'this' world of travail (p.3).

This is eloquent and makes *caste* specific, but does not make gender equally specific. Violence afflicted on the exploited is seen as pervasive in the process of appropriation of the surplus, but it remains analyzed in a traditional Marxist fashion as a reflection of production relations, and women and the sexual dynamic seems to have a major role only in the period of the first historical transformation:

The subservient relationship of the male toward the female in matriarchal society in general . . . was now projected into the slave relationship of the enslaved tribe towards the enslaving tribe in general . . . It is this internal contradiction between the two sexes within a matriarchal agricultural tribe which gives birth to the external contradiction between an enslaving matriarchal agricultural tribe and an enslaved matrilineal tribe. (p.253).

But while Patil here sees the gender contradiction as central in the pre-surplus society and in the first historical transformation to an exploitative society, the underlying determinant factor remains economic. The transformation takes place

. . . only when a matriarchal agricultural tribe is in a position to procure agricultural surplus product within the most primitive tools permissible, as in the riparian civilization, and when draught animals have enabled its males to displace females in agricultural production (p.254).

Not only does Patil's explanation remain at the level of economic production, but women's subsidiary role in the new agricultural slave and feudal societies as well as in the production of the mixed capitalist-feudal (*jati*) society in India today seems to be taken for granted. Consequently they will have a subsidiary role in the liberation struggles. For this reason, Patil's often striking arguments relating to the changing position of women in Indian history do not, in the end, bring forward any new logic of the dynamic of patriarchy and gender. The ultimate logic remains the economic one, that changing production relations produce chang-

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ing patterns of family, sexuality and patriarchy, the difference being that Patil has presented caste and not class as the basis of production relations in pre-colonial India. Similarly, though his organization has a strong (if small) base among adivasi women, he has not brought forward any new organizational methods or programmes for the movement, aside from the demand for the application of the Hindu Code Bill to adivasi women—a demand which in this form is in fact rejected by other adivasi women's organizations such as the Shramik Stri Mukti Sanghatana of Shahada, and the Jharkhand Nari Mukti Samiti. Nevertheless, the wealth of material regarding male-female relations, women's power, sexuality and related violence and conflict that exists in traditional Indian sources which has been brought forward and theorized by Sharad Patil needs very much to be gone over by feminists, and a serious analysis of caste relations is still an unmet challenge of the Indian women's movement.

Sharad Joshi and the organization of peasant women: In November 1986 one of the largest gatherings (over one lakh) of peasant women in India was organized by the Shetkari Sanghatana, the powerful farmers' organization of Maharashtra. This was an important event, signalling what might be called "the second international decade of third world women" in which we could see, in various forms, the women's movement taking root among adivasi, dalit and peasant women in India. The booklet written for the Chandwad conference, *Shidori*, the conference manifesto, and various subsequent documents, as well as most of the programmes for the women's front of the Shetkari Sanghatana (the Shetkari Mahila Aghadi) have been initiated primarily by Sharad Joshi, the charismatic leader of the Sanghatana—yet they have been discussed extensively in numerous shivirs of the organization, rewritten and reformulated according to the proposals and demands coming from the women, and in real ways reflect both the pressure of the peasant women themselves as well as a more diffused impact of the contemporary women's movement. At one level, the theoretical stress on violence and insecurity found in the theory of the Mahila Aghadi derive from Joshi's longstanding theoretical preoccupations; at another they reflect, clearly better

than the inherited theories of traditional Marxists and radical feminists, the reality of the lives of rural Indian women.

Indeed, though the majority of commentators have tended to see these events in terms of Sharad Joshi and the Sanghatana trying to "use" women for political purposes, we can rather analyze the process as one of a major transformation of the Sanghatana itself under the impact of women. This farmers' organization began in 1979-80, like many others throughout the country, with movements centred around the problems of peasantry caught in the traumas of a State-dominated capitalist market—prices, inputs, indebtedness. Sharad Joshi gave it a firm "one-point programme" orientation to remunerative prices and an articulate theory centred on the exploitation of Bharat (mainly rural, but also including "refugees in the cities", i.e. the unorganized sector) by "India" (mainly urban but also including village "leaders"). With the formation of the women's organization in 1986, this one-point programme underwent a dramatic change, and the changes have continued to intensify. The thrust of the Chandwad session was toward political power and large-scale political action. This orientation has remained, but the content has deepened. With the formation of the "Samagra Mahila Aghadi" in June 1987 to fight the zila parishad elections—comprising the Shetkari Mahila Aghadi as its biggest force but also including Stri Mukti Sangharsh (a smaller rural women's organization based in Sangli district of Maharashtra) and individual women activists—the programmatic emphasis shifted towards "alternative development" themes: while stressing the fight against insecurity and village goondaism, its "development from a women's perspective" included commitments to provide drinking water and toilet facilities, alternative energy sources, alternative village-based work rather than just the "rock-breaking" of government employment schemes, alternative health programmes as a check to exploitative multinationals and money-hungry doctors, and alternative self-reliant funding for local panchayat institutions. While political decentralization and a more balanced, village-centred development had been part of Shetkari Sanghatana ideology from the beginning, it is striking that it has taken a programmatic expression only with the women's organization.

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By 1989, the women's wing had become the most organizationally active part of the Sanghatana, with an intensive round of shivirs, district melas, and a new campaign (this time initiated by the women) against village liquor shops. In the second session of the Shetkari Mahila Aghadi (Amraoti, November 1989) not only was it stressed that the Shetkari Sanghatana itself should be "mainly an organization of peasant women" because women were the most exploited section of peasants, but two important new programmes of property rights for women and communalism were focused on. The issue of communalism and religious fundamentalism was coming to a head in Maharashtra as well as in many other parts of India with the rise of the BJP and Shiv Sena and intensifying communal riots (mainly involving pogroms against Muslims), but while Sharad Joshi was trying to focus the attention of the Sanghatana as a whole on the fight against this "worst enemy of peasant unity", it is striking that his major support for this campaign came from the women. Joshi declared a ten day fast as a safeguard against communal riots as his part of the Amraoti session's resolution on communalism; the women responded with a mass one-day support fast and played a major role in the subsequent (January, 1990) "Phule-Ambedkar Prachar Yatra" which involved the fiercest attack on Shiv Sena heard by rural Maharashtrians up to that time. Finally, with a new government in power in Delhi promising to implement schemes of debt relief and remunerative prices and with Joshi himself "retiring" to head a high-level government committee on agricultural policy, it was clear by mid-1990 that while the Shetkari Sanghatana itself was into a period of at least temporary inactivity, the Shetkari Mahila Aghadi programmes were continuing.

Sharad Joshi's approach agrees with Marx's core perspective in which patriarchal oppression is seen as arising out of the growth of a surplus and the accumulation of that surplus in the hands of a handful of men who are the exploiters of the rest. It is because of this stress on exploitation and the struggle against it, as well as a firm claim to being materialist, that Sharad Joshi has at times called himself a "Marxist" even while proclaiming the need to overthrow such "outdated theories" as the labour theory of value and the notion of working class leadership. However, the theory differs

from "traditional Marxism" (Engels) in arguing that surplus accumulation does not result from property ownership; rather it is extracted through force and violence ("looting") and in the process women are violently suppressed, enslaved, raped and forced to seek protection in a male-dominated family. In the words of the Chandwad Manifesto,

Unfortunately the first bountiful harvests witnessed also the charms of bandits descending to plunder. Thus commenced the neo-barbaric age, popularly called civilization, replete with loot, pillage, massacres, abductions and destruction. Faced with the content of the Pandora's box she had discovered, the woman had no alternative but to acquiesce in the reallocation of tasks. Whole communities got restructured to defend themselves against attacks . . . Thus sprang up societies in which male offspring were a prized possession and martial arts were the highest accomplishment. Boys were brought up to be prepared physically for combat. Girls were conditioned to be the faceless reproducers of progeny and docile boosters of the testosterone levels of their protectors by a hundred arts, words and privileges.

The theory shares certain themes with radical feminism. In particular (perhaps even more strongly than any of the feminists) it sees violence as a primary and not a secondary factor in historical development. It also takes a positive view of "women's power": *stri shakticya jagranat stri-purush mukti* ("women's and men's liberation in the awakening of women's power") was the slogan for the first conference, and the second conference in 1989 reproduced a Madhubani mother-goddess painting to symbolize *stri shakti*. It argues along with the Marxist feminists that non-waged labour, including women's domestic labour and peasant subsistence production or petty-commodity production, is crucial to capital accumulation; in fact, Sharad Joshi shares with Maria Mies and the German feminists a fascination for the writings of Rosa Luxembourgh who was the first to stress that capital accumulation necessarily required the exploitation of "non-capitalist" modes. Unlike all "traditional Marxists"—including in this respect Sharad Patil—women's labour is seen as crucial not only in the period of the

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invention of agriculture but even in the "advanced capitalist" world of today, and this in a sense represents the material base for seeing women as a vanguard force in the peasants' struggle and peasants, in turn, as a kind of vanguard in the struggle against exploitation. Thus, Sharad Joshi, like today's feminists, also affirms the need for autonomy of a women's organization and stresses that it should include all women (in his language, those in "India" as well as "Bharat").

But, as much as any "traditional Marxist", the Shetkari Sanghatana theory and practice stresses that the fight for women's liberation is not a fight of women against men, but of women against an overall exploitative system. Like the Marxist trend, it also urges that the struggle be a collective, mass and organized one, in contrast to either lobbying for legal reform or "small group" efforts at opposing individual atrocities. There is, similarly, little patience for an interpretation of "the personal is political" which ignores the question of State power.

The crucial difference with the Marxist position is in regard to the focus of the mass struggle of women: where the left has traditionally sought to bring women into wage struggles and into "participation in social production", Sharad Joshi has stressed mass efforts to combat violence, "goondaism" and "insecurity". The general new peasant movement has focused more against the State rather than private property-holders such as landlords or moneylenders; demands for higher crop prices, freedom from debt or provision of inputs such as electric power are demands made to the State, and the rhetoric of the Shetkari Sanghatana has described powerholders or exploiters as *looters* and *dadas* rather than "capitalists" or "the rich", i.e. as men of power and violence rather than men of property. This "political" orientation has been seen even more clearly in the women's wing. Although various issues from drinking water to a uniform civil code were part of the resolutions at the Chandwad conference, the two main struggle campaigns proposed— a march of peasant women in Delhi to demand justice for women victims of rape in the atrocities on Sikhs following Indira Gandhi's assassination, and 100 per cent women panels for zila parishad elections in Maharashtra —focused directly on the issues of mass violence, goondaism and political power.



The campaign for women's entry into panchayat raj institutions clearly reflects the aspirations of the peasant women themselves; there were sporadic efforts in Maharashtra (and elsewhere in India) to contest village panchayat elections even before 1986 and by 1989 local branches of the Mahila Aghadi on their own initiative had got four all-women gram panchayats elected in four different districts of Maharashtra. But it was the Chandwad conference and the Samagra Mahila Aghadi which first put this issue on a public, collective basis and focused the challenge of women's political power in a way which provoked the Congress party to put forth the proposal for 30 per cent reserved seats for women in panchayati raj institutions.

Thus, in orienting women's struggles on the issue of political power and in arguing not merely for the participation but even the leadership of women in the general revolutionary movement, Sharad Joshi has—more than the radical feminist or traditional Marxist trends—articulated the needs and force of the awakening rural women. It may also be argued that more than Sharad Patil, he has been influenced himself by such indigenous thinkers as Jotiba Phule: his overall theory stressing the looting of the peasantry by a State-based bureaucracy draws in fact on Phule as much as on Marx. He has generally lacked Phule's stress on the sexual oppression of women within the family—concentrating instead on the atrocities against women from outside the family. Indeed all the economic and cultural bondages constraining rural women make this one of the most difficult issues to bring forward at a public level. However the underlying aspirations of such women can be seen pushing this issue forward also—in the anti-alcohol campaign (where a crucial aspect is that of violence against women in the family) and the focus on giving women property rights and equality in the family which came out more strongly in the 1989 Amraoti conference of the Shetkari Mahila Aghadi.

Vandana Shiva: rural women on the international stage: Perhaps the most well-known, internationally, of India's feminists in recent times is Vandana Shiva, whose work has come forward in connection with India's most famous environmental resistance, the Chipko movement. Women have from the beginning played a major

role in this struggle to protect the forests of the Himalayan foothills, partly because their men have been drawn much more to commercial opportunities in the plains, and partly out of their traditional roles and strengths in a relatively egalitarian peasant community. While some have argued that this role has been exaggerated—and indeed, women have remained subordinated to the male leadership of the overall movement and have even suffered for their defence of a broad pattern of using forests for fodder, fuel and food rather than just commercial logging, it is still not without justice that the Chipko movement is described as a women's movement. Vandana Shiva has emerged to articulate the theory of this struggle in recent years and to attempt to voice the needs of rural third world women on the world stage.

In coming forth as an ecofeminist spokesperson, Shiva draws, in many ways, on themes from the works of Maria Mies and her colleagues, stressing the naturally creative relationship of women to nature, the role of women in subsistence production, and a broad, historical process of patriarchy and exploitation that especially victimizes third world peasant and tribal communities and women. However, Shiva's thrust and style are strikingly different from those of Chhaya Datar, who up to now has been the main Indian interpreter of Mies' work. In contrast to the rather abstract orientation of Datar, Shiva is forceful, emotional and perhaps above all confrontational in posing third world rural women against the destructive and dominating forces of international capital. As with Sharad Joshi, violence is central to her theme, but where Joshi takes violence as the major aspect of the accumulation of capital from the beginning of agricultural society, Shiva sees it as a particular product of western science and technology and the international imperialist impact. And where Joshi stresses the internal contradiction to pose Bharat versus India and sees the power of women as a major force in organizing the struggle of Bharat, Shiva poses the third world peasant community, led by women using the forces of the *stri shakti* or *prakriti* tradition, against international capital and State domination itself.

Rather than the Marxism which provides the historical and biographical background to the writings of ecofeminists such as Mies and Datar, Shiva seems in some ways to be influenced by the

Gandhian tradition. Gandhism, which has been on the periphery of the recent Indian women's movement for so long, now seems to be having a bit of a revival, partly through its influence on many environmental movements and partly through the writings of anti-ism feminists such as Madhu Kishwar. Gandhi himself, while playing an important role in providing scope for women to come into the national struggle, ultimately represented a kind of patriarchal absorption of feminist traditions, in that his view of women as naturally non-violent and capable of suffering and struggle was part of a world-view that identified the forces of sexuality and power associated with women as dangerous to the need for liberation (*moksha*). Vandana Shiva's writings clearly do not have this tendency and instead identify the very forces of power and creativity associated with women, the identification of nature and the feminine principle of the *prakriti* tradition, as the major strength for a movement against violence and destruction. In this sense the focus of a liberatory struggle is given a materialist rather than a spiritualist direction. Nevertheless, in sharing with Gandhi the critique of western civilization, of industrial science and technology, in posing against it the traditional village communities of India, Shiva also shows a tendency to identify the forces of destruction and domination in idealistic terms (as western science and technology) and to idealize the Indian (more specifically Hindu) tradition and the communities embodying it.

The strengths of Shiva's writings lie in her holistic view and in the identification of women not simply as victims but as possessing power for change. A broad vision is clear in almost all her writings, which pull together themes of imperialism, patriarchy, the culture of modern society, socio-economic inequalities and ecological and human destruction. For example, her book on Punjab, *The Violence of the Green Revolution*, begins with noting that the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Norman Borlaug in 1970 was an effort to validate the science of the Green Revolution, but

Paradoxically, after two decades of the Green Revolution, Punjab is neither a land of prosperity, nor peace. It is a region riddled with discontent and violence. Instead of abundance, Punjab has been left with diseased soils, pest-infested crops, water-logged desert and indebted and dis-

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contented farmers. Instead of peace, Punjab has inherited conflict and violence (p.1)

This type of focus contrasts both with that of the radical feminists who pinpoint the family as the unit of violence against women, and with most Indian Marxist analyses which see the inequalities and violence associated with the Green Revolution only within the framework of the village.

Similarly, Shiva has moved decisively beyond the normal tendency to see women as victims, dominant for so long in both the women's movement and Marxist analyses of exploitation. As she clearly states in a discussion of "Women, Development and Ecology",

To say that women and nature are intimately associated is not to say anything revolutionary . . . The new insight provided by rural women in the Third World is that women and nature are associated not in passivity but in creativity and in the maintenance of life. This analysis differs from most conventional analyses of environmentalists and feminists. Most work on women and environment in the Third World has focused on women as special victims of environmental degradation. Yet the women who participate in and lead ecology movements in countries like India are not speaking merely as victims. Their voices are the voices of liberation and transformation . . . The women's and ecology movements are therefore one, and are primarily counter-trends to a patriarchal maldevelopment.

Staying Alive, p.13.

Thus, her identification of the "feminine principle" is not a posing of women against men in which women are seen as being biologically superior due to their productive and reproductive powers, but rather an almost metaphorical way of stating an orientation to nature and life in which women are seen as a vanguard in a liberation struggle.

Shiva's writings have become more quickly a focus for debate within the Indian women's movement than those of Sharad Patil or Sharad Joshi. Idealism, romanticism about the extent of

women's actual power and command of ecologically sustainable relations to land and forest, neglect of the realities of hierarchies, subordination, patriarchy and even violence within traditional tribal and peasant communities are some of the charges against her. Govind Kelkar and Dev Nathan's work not only takes up some of the basic issues of the origins of gender and patriarchy, but shows in a well-documented study of the Jharkhand region, the complexities of relations to the forest and the existence of patriarchy and inequality even among tribals; such inequalities are much more, needless to say, among caste Hindu peasant and fishing communities, which may also have had traditionally (relatively) ecological practices, but where women in fact seem to be subordinated rather than the leaders of the community in the protection of nature and the fight against destructive development. The ambiguities of the *stri-shakti* concept and mother-goddess tradition, its frequent ideological functioning in the service of patriarchy, have also been pointed out by Gabriele Dietrich and many others. Shiva's simple equation of the women's movement and the ecology movement often appears more of a projection than a factual description in a situation where both movements are most often limited to short-term or survival issues, and the women's movement remains dominated by urban women and the ecology movement by men.

Shiva is not unaware of these ambiguities and inequalities. It seems rather that her tendency is to underplay them in an effort to focus the women's struggle against what might be called in traditional Marxist language, the "main contradiction" of "imperialism". She is aware, more than many of her critics, of the need for action in a historical juncture when the increasing forces of destruction and domination in the world system as well as the rise of some material forces for liberation make a combination that can go either towards liberation or towards the reconstruction of domination and exploitation. Beneath the superficial dominance of men in the movements, behind their constant appearance as victims of atrocities and impoverishment, she discusses the basic power of toiling women as a force for change—and she apparently sees her own role as a spokesperson in numerous fora as that of trying to create openings within which this power can be asserted.

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In an era of still inchoate but turbulent and creative mass movements, it may be a necessary role.

Enduring question : the historical test

It can be noted that the three "new theorists" discussed above share a heavy stress on violence—but with crucial differences. Sharad Patil sees violence as pervasive, but ultimately understands this as reflecting the relations of production of the "class-caste" society. In the agrarian societies based on *dasa-sudra* slavery and in the post-colonial exploitative mode (which he defines in rather conventional Marxist terms as a combination of capitalist/class and feudal/caste), women's labour, violence against women, and women's resistance are all rather secondary. Partly under the impact of the adivasi women in his organization and partly under the influence of the general women's movement, Patil has moved to include the "end of women's slavery" along with the "end of casteism" as a major goal, but women's role in the overall liberation struggle is not seen as particularly decisive.

In contrast, Sharad Joshi makes violence central to the process of capital accumulation from the very beginning of the "looting society" and also sees women's labour as central to the process of exploitation throughout the subsequent historical period. After beginning his movement career with the "one-point programme" of remunerative prices for peasants, Joshi has also moved forward under the impact of peasant women and the broader women's movement, but he has gone further than Sharad Patil or other neo-Marxists and now affirms that peasant women are central to the Shetkari Sanghatana itself, and "women's power" is a major force for human liberation in general. Indeed, where he refused within the general peasant movement to speak of goals in terms of such things as "liberation" or "socialism", within the women's front and its debates he has taken the clear stand that the goal is the "end of women's slavery" and a "non-looting society" in which the women's movement, the peasant movement and new technological forces all have a role to play.

Vandana Shiva gives another variation on these themes by seeing violence as a main factor in the dominating, destructive processes of a world capitalist system, but in contrast to the insis-

tence of both Patil and Joshi that they are historical materialists, she has a tendency to locate the dynamics of the system in "western culture" and the scientific, technological outlook of the industrial era. Even more than Joshi, she stresses women as the protectors of nature and the traditional community and celebrates the "feminine principle" as a liberatory force—and of course in contrast to Joshi she shares the eco-feminist tendency to look at modern science and technology in often starkly negative terms.

In spite of these differences, all of these approaches share an orientation to a collective struggle against exploitation even while they reject the traditional Marxist concept of "class struggle" for being defined too much in terms of property ownership and too identified with wage-paid factory workers. In this respect, and especially for Sharad Joshi and Vandana Shiva, in taking the issue of political power and the State quite seriously they represent an important step beyond the earlier dichotomies of "Marxism" and "feminism".

Coming as they do out of involvement with mass rural women's movements, these theories push Indian feminist activists to do more than simply define their fight as one against "atrocities" or as a gender-based resistance of women to the violence of men; instead they see it as part of the human liberation struggle in general. The call to be "part of the general revolutionary movement" has of course been a theme of Indian Marxists from the beginning, but it has been put forward in a rather forced and mechanical way in which women's exploitation was initially viewed as subordinate to the main dialectic of exploitation and struggle, and women were simply urged to join a struggle which was viewed as understandably apart from them. (Indeed, throughout the period, traditional left party leaders, while encouraging women to "join the mainstream struggle", did little to urge the various other sections of the mainstream to "join the women's movement".) This habit has been justly exposed and resented by feminists, but more feminists in reaction remained not only uninvolved with the parties but also aloof from collective social-political struggles. An acceptance in theory by most feminists of the need for an overall revolutionary movement (expressed perhaps most vigorously in the songs of the women's

movement!) was thus unaccompanied by clearcut mass action programmes—and rather tended to seek refuge in small-group, individualized and pocket-based actions. Now, with their base in women's mass involvement in some of the most important "new social movements" in India (the new farmers' movement, the anti-caste movement and the environmental movement), new "organic intellectuals" are beginning to affirm not only women's participation but women's leading role in human liberation, and they are giving concrete theoretical arguments for this—though quite different arguments from those of conventional "Marxist" or "feminist" theory. The new theorizing and the positions taken are polemical, sometimes overstated and oversimplified, but there is no denying their resonance and power.

What about the concrete theoretical questions raised by the now enriched Indian debate—and what about the action programmes implied by the different positions? In contrast to the radical feminist theoretical stress on sexuality and the traditional Marxist stress on production and private property, Sharad Patil focusses on production and caste, Sharad Joshi on violence, and Vandana Shiva on the cultural basis of contemporary capital and State domination. In this sense, the theories can even be said to be complementary, with each having something to contribute to an integrated comprehensive theory.

Nevertheless, the differences are worth exploring, and can be done in two ways—with a historical-empirical test of the validity of the arguments made and with a test in action of the theories: what programmes do they generate and how in practice are these programmes being implemented to achieve women's liberation? (After all, following an earlier famous revolutionary, if not feminist, theorist, "the point is to change the world"). Both forms of testing are of course extremely complicated, but we might conclude this survey by making a beginning.

First, let us try to give a historical and empirical assessment of these theoretical approaches. What happens if we try to assess their analyses of the origins and nature of women's slavery and violence against women over the long historical period of the development of human society, according to the known scientific evidence of today?

While many feminists (and other movement activists) are inclined to argue that either the question of origins is not important or that there is too little evidence and the issue is too complicated to resolve at present, there has been, in fact, a good deal of advance in many social science disciplines over the last decades, and while the task is daunting for an outsider, some generalizations can still be made. But in attempting to do so, we should first make a comment about methodology: any scientific analysis of society should be both materialist and historical. That is, it should begin not with what people think about what they do but with (as far as we can tell) what they actually do; and it cannot gain an understanding of the past by simple derivations from data about societies existing in a later period. The first point means that any literary (written) evidence has to be used with extreme caution. The second means that evidence gathered by anthropologists from currently existing "tribal" (hunting-gathering or horticultural) societies cannot be simply applied to characterize hunting-gathering societies existing thousands of years ago. The total social and environmental context, the availability of tools and weapons, the impact of external state societies or capitalist societies is completely different. Thus, for example, the fact that many "tribal" societies today show various forms of patriarchy/patriliny/matriliny, etc. does not mean that these social forms existed in the pre-State period of, say, 4000 BC, and the existence of what looks like "matriarchal" features in some societies around 1500 BC also cannot be assumed to characterize a "stage in history" or apply to a genuinely pre-State period. We cannot simply assume that any social features are "remnants" of the past. Therefore, the evidence used to assess the question of the origins of exploitation, patriarchy and violence is primarily archaeological and secondarily historical (use of written materials available from the early state period onwards), and not anthropological.

According to my understanding of the currently available archaeological and historical evidence, we can make the following generalizations :

1. There is no archaeological evidence for gender differentiation before about 30,000 BC (that is, of seeing "males" and "females" as somehow different social beings), although there is evidence of

human cultural activity for about 100,000 years. In other words, the existence of a primordial but human, pre-gender society (in which, while biological males and females existed, they were not differentiated sociologically through a division of labour or in terms of cultural conceptualization) is at least possible. From about 35,000 BC there is evidence of gender conceptualization—e.g. in the Cro-Magnon cave paintings in France (which show in detail flowering, fertility, seasons of plants and animals and later depictions of pregnant women), in widespread female figurines or “mother goddess” figures which appear all over the world especially in the pre-State and early State period. However, there is no evidence that this gender differentiation, the difference in the conceptualization of women and men, was associated with either male domination (patriarchy) or female domination (matriarchy).

In other words, we should reject both radical feminist notions of male domination associated with hunting as the earliest form of exploitation and violence—and the traditional Marxist (in the version of “matriarchy” used by Sharad Patil) notion of an early “stage” of matriarchy.

2. Settled agricultural societies appear from about 10,000—8000 BC, but there is not much evidence that this first production of a “surplus” led to violence, class exploitation or patriarchal domination until after a long period. On the contrary, archaeological excavations in such sites as Huyuk in Turkey show a relatively peaceful society, with no economic differentiation between households, with goddesses and women playing a role as priestesses, but with no evidence of women’s domination (“matriarchy”) in other forms. In other words, the production of a surplus or potential surplus may have made private appropriation (exploitation, patriarchy, etc.) possible but not necessary; there is evidence, on the contrary, for thousands of years of quite peaceful early agricultural societies.

3. Evidence of patriarchal domination over women does appear in the period after the rise of the first states in Mesopotamia and Egypt, as shown in the excellent study by Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*. From this time, after about 3000 BC, we can trace male domination as rulers; male control as “head of the family”, slavery in which women are of special importance as

slaves; and legal systems that legitimize the patriarchal control of men over wives and children, patrilineal and patrilocal marriage as well as crucial distinctions between wife, mistress and prostitute—all backed up by the organized violence of the State. (And all existing at a time when mother goddesses continued to have great importance, though we can also trace the gradual suppression of these traditions by patriarchal religion).

4. It should also be stressed that there is no evidence that private property and ownership of land or other "means of production" precedes the formation of these states; there is no evidence for a separate "landholding" or "slaveholding" class whose power is based on the control of property. In other words, instead of the "Engels model" (which presumes the primitive communism/slavery/feudalism/capitalism/socialism/version of the "stages of history"), the evidence seems to fit instead a model which proposes an "Asiatic mode of production" as the first type of exploitative society—in which the earliest States were ruled by a "State class" (the priest-kings of the Mesopotamian city-states, the Egyptian pharaohs) who extracted surplus from a peasantry still immersed in collective kinship (lineage) relations of production. Only later and gradually did classes of merchants and independent landholders appear. The Engels model, and the general historical description in *Origin of the Family*, does fit well the States he described—the Greek and Roman States, as well as many aspects of the Magadha-Mauryan States in India—all of which arose in the middle of the first millennium BC. But these were what anthropologists today call "secondary States", arising over 2000 years after the historically first States of Egypt, Mesopotamia and the Indus valley, and influenced by the socio-historical processes initiated with these first States.

On this basis we can tentatively say that the overall historical and archaeological evidence back up the stress on the autonomous role of force and violence found in the Shetkari Sanghatana theory and other recent theories of exploitation. However, it appears that rather than looting and violence creating exploitation and patriarchy from the time of the first rise of the agricultural surplus, the role of the State itself—organized and legitimated violence—appears to be central. It appears that all forms of domination—"loot-

ing", economic exploitation and patriarchy—began not immediately or automatically with the development of productive forces, but only after a relatively long historical period.

However, if the historical evidence allows us to reject the oversimplifications of a traditional Marxist or a radical feminist theory, it also impels us to consider some other aspects. For instance, the undeniable role of caste relations in the development of State domination, exploitation and patriarchy in the Indian subcontinent means that we have to meet the theoretical challenge posed by Phule, Ambedkar and Sharad Patil—even if their particular explanations of this may be found wanting. Second, the intensification of all of these in the current era of capitalism and imperialism and their link with ecological destruction (the destruction of nature itself, i.e. of the very conditions of economic production) focused on by Vandana Shiva and other eco-feminist theorists has to be admitted. That is even if we reject Shiva's readiness to ignore the patriarchy, exploitation and even ecological destruction found in pre-colonial society, we need a theory of the contemporary capitalist world system that is as holistic and inclusive of the issues raised by feminism as her's.

It is also clear from the historical record that the "dialectics of sex" is crucial: from the very first written records in the period of the rise of the first States, we have evidence of the centrality of male-female relations of sexual domination, of the definition of women as good/bad, wife/mistress/prostitute in terms of a State-regulated sexual relationship to men. In this sense the insights of radical feminism have to be incorporated into any analysis. And, finally, while we may reject the simplifications of the "traditional Marxist" tendency to see violence as only an epiphenomenon, while we may indeed have to throw out the interpretation of "class" and "class struggle" in terms of private property and the centrality of a factory-based largely male proletariat, no one concerned with women's liberation can afford to forget that "class struggle" has always been a metaphor for the continuing importance of how humans produce to the shaping of their society, the existence of exploitation and contradiction in this process, the necessity and possibility of the struggle for liberation.

Changing the world, changing ourselves

In the context of increasing violence against women and a pervasive social-political crisis, feminist theorizing in India appears to be emerging into an era of new richness and complexity, spearheaded by intellectuals connected with mass movements. But what about the question of programme? We want after all to change the world, not simply understand it. Here also, it appears possible to say that all the basic conditions of women's oppression and exploitation—control of property and the means of production, control over political power and the means of violence, control over their own bodies and the means of reproduction—are at least coming on to the historical agenda.

Radical and liberal feminists in India, organized primarily in the urban-based middle-class "autonomous feminist" groups have focused organizing efforts on issues of family and sexual violence, rape, amniocentesis, wife-beating, mobilizing on sati and the legal struggles of Muslim and Christian minorities. The charge made by mass organizations, that too much energy goes into lobbying and simply resisting individual atrocities, may be true: there is not only the tendency to neglect economic issues but also an alienation from the issues of political power and little challenge to the social, systematic basis behind increasing atrocities. Nevertheless, urban feminists can be credited with helping to create a wide atmosphere of resistance in which women at all levels are increasingly standing up to fight the violence against them and seeking resources to live independently and with dignity.

Strikingly, some of the most concerted concrete challenges to the existing caste-patriarchal family structure are coming from outside the traditional left or urban feminist groups. A movement of *parityakta* (abandoned, divorced/deserted) women has grown initially from rural or small-town based organisations such as Stri Mukti Sangharsh and Samata Andolan in Maharashtra and is increasingly being taken up by all kinds of organizations to seek in practice, through demands made on the State, the economic support and social legitimation for women to live outside the family. While the issues (the double standard, the right of men to have as many relations or marriages as desired while women are castigated for not remaining *pativrata*) are the same as those raised by

Jotiba Phule and Tarabai Shinde over a hundred years ago, the difference is they are now getting raised in social struggle. Sexuality is still one of the most difficult issues to discuss publicly in India, but the concrete possibility of women of all social levels to survive singly is clearly the most important step towards destroying the patriarchal family and replacing it with more egalitarian relations between men and women.

Traditional Marxists—the women's wings of the left political parties—appear to be caught in an even greater paradox than the urban-based feminists. Their own theory should lead them to see the issue of women's control over the means of production as central. Yet, while they have continually put forward demands for "women's participation in social production" and taken up wage and employment issues, they have never organised a collective fight on women's property rights but rather (like other women's organizations from 1975 onwards) have mobilized mainly on "reactive" issues—fighting atrocities, resisting communalism. In contrast, actual organizing on the question of women's property rights was taken up mainly by "non-traditional" mass organizations: it was the Gandhian-Socialist Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini which first took up the struggle to give land to landless women in 1983, and recently it has been organizations like the Shetkari Mahila Aghadi which have made land rights for peasant women a part of an action programme. At the same time, as the discussion on "common civil code" moves to the concrete stage of including specific recommendations to give women inheritance rights, the impetus for this has come from outside the traditional parties also—including autonomous groups, mass organizations (among these, adivasi-based organizations like Sharad Patil's Satyashodhak Mahila Sabha and the Jharkhand Nari Mukti Samiti wave specifically dealt with adivasi women's property rights), and independent women activists.

The question of women's access to political power has been spearheaded, at the mass movement level, by the Shetkari Mahila Aghadi. The 1986 Chandwad Conference Resolutions focussing on political action had no immediate success: the call for mass demonstrations against Sikh women in Delhi never came off, while the effort to form all-women panels to fight zila parishad

elections in Maharashtra remained stymied with elections postponed and with little support from other women's organizations or political parties. Still, the impetus given by the women's drive for political power cannot be discounted: not only have Shetkari Sanghatana-connected women and men activists organized four successful all-women panels at the gram panchayat level (two of them with Muslim and backward caste sarpanches) but in the 1990 State assembly elections Shetkari Sanghatana, under the leadership of Sharad Joshi, and the Janata Dal, under the impetus of party leader and activist Mrinal Gore put up more women candidates (21) than ever before. Government proposals for 30 per cent women's reservations at the village and district level can be seen as a response to both this collective challenge and the sporadic, localized drives of women for local political power throughout India. In a context of increasing electoral violence and the communal challenge, and in response to the fact that women elected at the Lok Sabha and State assembly levels are actually declining in contrast to all world trends, many urban feminist groups and left parties are now reconsidering their reluctance to take the drive for women's political power seriously, and various forums are being organized to support women in politics.

The issues of caste and patriarchy, and ecology and feminism remain a bit more problematic at the level of programme. Caste has in effect been ignored by women's organizations of all types, while dalit and other low-caste organizations continue to be dominated by male leadership. Even Sharad Patil's theoretical inclusion of a fight against patriarchy has too often taken the form of castigating as "Brahmanic" all other women's movement activists without giving more than a "one-point programme" of implementing the Hindu Code Bill for adivasi women. At most, the issue is now being discussed more seriously. Similarly, Vandana Shiva's insistence that ecology is inherently a women's issue has not been accompanied by any specific organizational programme for women, and it appears to be contradicted by the fact that the ecology movement in India is as male-dominated as practically any other mass movement. In fact, organizations fighting for rehabilitation of dam and project evictees have rarely considered giving women independent access to the land they are

demanding in compensation; they rather have seemed content with reproducing patriarchy in the reconstructed village settlements! Signs of change here are appearing also more at the level of consciousness and discussion of the issues.

Nevertheless, it is an awakening consciousness that shows the new ferment of a deepening women's movement. Intensification of cultural struggle can also be seen. The mass-linked women's organizations, the party women's wings, and the urban feminist collectives have all been involved for a long time in activities ranging from publishing song books and making poster exhibits to organizing *prachar yatras* on topics ranging from the issue of atrocities against women to anti-communalism. These are spreading, and along with this there is an on-going effort to reappraise, from a feminist point of view, traditions such as *stri-shakti*, *bhakti* and the *virangana* tradition of "heroic women" in Indian history. While many feel this reappraisal is going too far—to the point of ignoring limitations and ambiguities—at least the debate is pushing the Indian women's movement beyond the earlier tendencies of both Marxists and feminists to simply dismiss all religion and traditional culture as uniformly "patriarchal".

Old theories, stereotyped ideas and conventional methods of action are being challenged. The feminist movement has always stressed that the liberation struggle is not simply one of mobilizing an army to capture State power and establish the socialist society, but of changing relations between human beings here and now, changing the very methods and process of action. Only this is not simply a process of changing individuals as much as a transformation of the collective movements against exploitation themselves. The old hegemony of traditional Marxism over anti-systemic movements is clearly dying, if not dead—but feminists, who have challenged this tradition on so many points, now find themselves also caught in the crisis of the very dilemmas and problems traditional left movements had dealt with in their efforts to end exploitation. In fact it is the mass movements arising from those at the very depths of an exploitative and destructive social order, particularly the movements of peasant, adivasi and dalit women, and the theories coming out of them, that are in the forefront of dealing with the challenge and the crisis.



